

Town of Middlebury
Economic Health Committee
Minutes of Meeting
October 24, 2019

Present: Fred Kenney, Becky Dayton, Ben Calvi, and John Freidin. Duguay arrived later in the meeting.

Absent: Mary Cullinane, Farhad Khan, Steve Boyce, Scott Gemignani and ex-officio member, Jennifer Murray.

Kenney called the meeting to order at 12:10 p.m.

(Taken out of order.) The minutes of 10/10/19 were approved as presented upon motion by Dayton, seconded by Duguay.

Kenney asked Freidin to summarize his thoughts and concerns expressed in his memo of 10/23/19 regarding the final report.

Freidin said he had links to several websites for organizations that specialize in helping towns and cities revitalize themselves, especially towns with historic centers that are struggling. He said attendance has been pretty bad in the last six months, and it removes some authority from the Committee's conclusions if it's only from a handful of people. He thinks these websites should be looked at to see if there are any communities in Vermont who have worked with any of these organizations. He'd also like to hear from the Mayor of Vergennes, because everyone he's talked to thinks things are happening in Vergennes, where they aren't in Middlebury. He said people think Vergennes is a much more active and happening place than Middlebury, and they like the restaurants and entertainment. He also would like to hear from some Middlebury College professors who have studied these types of issues. He went on to say that revitalization anywhere requires vision, some kind of idea of what you want to change, it takes enthusiasm and leadership and widespread public input, and procedures such as used in "Slow Democracy". Kenney said that creating a "vision" is one of the recommendations the Committee addresses in Critical Factor #1.

Calvi said he's concerned this Committee has hit the point of diminishing returns on what they can deliver. He said attendance alone justifies not continuing with the Committee, and while it would be nice to hear additional information and spend time doing the research, he doesn't think this Committee is going to accomplish that. He would be concerned if the Committee continues it will be more of the same for attendance, with only 3 or 4 people attending.

Freidin said the lack of attendance indicates a lack of enthusiasm, and members should be encouraged to attend or perhaps the Selectboard could appoint new people to the Committee.

(Duguay entered the meeting.)

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44 Calvi said his thinking is the Committee make a recommendation based on what information they've
45 heard so far, while acknowledging that there is still more information out there and there is still more
46 work to be done. He said his recommendation would be the Town hire a full-time economic
47 development staff person and present them with the various models, but he thinks a paid person is
48 needed to pursue these economic development ideas. He said he doesn't see the Committee as being
49 the vehicle to make this happen.

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51 Dayton said the charge of the Committee was to assess various economic tools, and we've done that, so
52 she feels their work is done. She said the Committee was not asked to solve all the economic problems
53 in the community, and while there is a lot more to do, she doesn't think it's up to this Committee.

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55 Freidin said he finds it hard to advise the Town on how to invigorate the downtown when we have not
56 taken advantage of the Main Street Alliance or other organizations that have studied and implemented
57 their ideas. He said there has been no talk about a vision, and he thinks the Committee should suggest
58 one. He also wonders if the Committee should make a recommendation on the concentration of
59 businesses or should they just locate wherever they're allowed and cause sprawl. Dayton said that was
60 the work of the Town Planner and Town Plan, and not the task of this Committee. Freidin said whether
61 it was their task or not, it's an opportunity and it won't be solved by a Planner. He said things don't
62 happen when you hire someone, it didn't happen before when the Town hired someone. Calvi said
63 they're all valid points, but this Committee doesn't have the bandwidth to do any more than they were
64 charged with. Personally he doesn't think the Committee should work another 6 months on this.

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66 There was further discussion on the vision and the charge of the Committee, and the information the
67 Committee has heard to date. Freidin and the rest of the Committee were in disagreement over
68 whether more information should be gathered before writing the report. Kenney said he feels that the
69 Critical Factors the Committee identified, and the steps under each of the Critical Factors would then
70 become the goals and objectives in the report. He said they would also need to include an analysis on
71 the specific things the Selectboard asked the Committee to look into. The Committee discussed the
72 vision and who they felt was best suited to create the vision.

73

74 Kenney said there needed to be a consensus on a recommendation for the remaining funds in the
75 Middlebury Business Development Fund and the CBDG Grant, which totals about \$135,000. He said his
76 idea had been to use it as "seed" money to help new businesses or start a program similar to what
77 Rutland is doing, assuming there is someone at the Town to administer these funds. He said the
78 Committee also should recommend the Town find a sustainable source of revenue for funding economic
79 development, such as the Local Option Tax.

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81 Duguay said there are a lot of infrastructure improvements needed by businesses looking to come into
82 the downtown. She said when Parlour moved to downtown, they spent \$100,000 Of their own money
83 to do the upgrades to the space they moved into, but not everyone has the ability to fund this kind of
84 work. She said the basement of Bundle at 51 Main Street is not up to fire code and it is a missed

85 opportunity since that is a valuable space for businesses, but who's going to invest that money if they
86 aren't sure they'll get their return on investment right off. She thinks that is a barrier for businesses
87 wanting to come downtown. Dayton said the community is also not good at expressing gratitude to the
88 people who invest in their downtown businesses, and that's one of the differences between Vergennes
89 and Middlebury. She said the most important thing that can be done is for people to shop downtown
90 and tell the operators of the businesses that they're glad they're there. She said Kelly Hickey and Bundle
91 are the kind of "human capital" needed to bring Middlebury around.

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93 Duguay said one of the things they haven't spent a lot of time on is the concept of areas where the
94 Town can get out of the way of businesses. She said when Parlour moved downtown the location of
95 their sign was questioned and it eventually turned out to be okay, but she feels it's an example of when
96 the Town could say "yes" instead of "no". She said we need to be better ambassadors to help these
97 businesses navigate, and no one is trying to get away with anything, but maybe the rules could be
98 lightened up. Freidin said he totally agreed and it's because there is no leadership and the result is staff
99 doing what they're supposed to do and that is to enforce what is written down, and that attitude has to
100 change if we're going to enable businesses. Duguay said she also doesn't think it should be up to the
101 discretion of the Planning and Zoning staff, they're following the rules as written, so maybe the rules
102 should be lightened up. She said Dave Wetmore and Jen Murray in Planning and Zoning went above and
103 beyond so Bundle could open at 51 Main, and she's very appreciative of that, but where can we let them
104 have a little leeway.

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106 Kelly Hickey of Bundle, said that the Vermont Downtown Co-coordinator Gary Halloway charges towns
107 with going to their zoning departments and to eliminate 3 things in their zoning that seem ridiculous and
108 let the towns know that these are wasting everyone's time and aren't helping, and the next year you do
109 the same thing, and that's how towns evolve. Freidin said that this idea of eliminating 3 regulations
110 should come from the Selectboard since they're the leaders with some authority. Hickey said the
111 Selectboard are a voice of the community, so unless the Board hears it from us over and over, they
112 won't carry it forward. Freidin agreed and said you can't hire someone to do it, and Kenney thought
113 that's where an advisory committee might work.

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115 Hickey informed the Committee of her success with Bundle and how they're turning folks away because
116 the space is so popular. She said the time she has to put into it far outweighs what has been budgeted
117 for her salary. Duguay said it's a huge success and they're now looking at extending Bundle beyond the
118 ending of the VTrans funding.

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120 (Ben Calvi left the meeting at this time.)

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122 Kenney asked Hickey if the barrier to having more events was funding for the time she spends there.
123 She said she isn't complaining and she could continue as she has been, and she also sees that she
124 needs to go to other groups, so she went to the Downtown Improvement District Commission for more
125 funds and she would love to hear of other possible funding sources.

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127 Hickey and Duguay informed the Committee of the work done by Bundle and how they have realized
128 the economic development opportunities that have come forward since this space opened up. Duguay
129 said they've discussed what the downtown of the future looks and she thinks it will be businesses that
130 are diverse and different at different times of the year. Kenney said this Committee's recommendations
131 actually need to be forward looking into the future when talking about the downtown. Duguay said
132 when she's asked people about what they like about downtown Middlebury, the majority say it's the
133 "sense of community".

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135 They went over the draft of the report structure and divided up what sections of the report they'd like
136 to work on writing a draft, in hopes of having the first draft back to the Committee by January. Kenney
137 also asked them to be thinking about sustainable funding source that could be recommended, such as
138 the Local Option Tax.

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140 Kenney will sending a Doodle Poll to find out the best time for the next meeting.

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142 The meeting adjourned at 1:29 p.m.